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Mr David Windle  
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1 February 2017

Dear David

I am writing in response to your letter of 14 January, regarding forestry works on Mar Lodge Estate.

I appreciate the time taken by you and your members to investigate this issue, and will attempt to provide some constructive feedback on all the points you raise. So here goes!

The first point you raise relates to the logs left following our horse logging experiment in 2013. I think the first thing to say is that in general I agree with you entirely. It is not ideal that so many logs were left at trackside following this work. You may be aware that using horse loggers was an experimental option, and while the overall results in the woodland were good, the conclusion we came to was that it was not a technique that we could use on an ongoing basis, due to the time and cost implications. I will be completely honest and say that the contract we had in place with the team carrying out the work did not run smoothly, and in fact we only just managed to persuade them to stay for the demonstration event. Their contract had come to an end and unfortunately they left with a substantial amount of wood still to be extracted. This was not an ideal situation but I think if they had stayed any longer it would have simply led to further difficulties for both parties.

We then had a dilemma, because to extract that timber would require putting machines into the wood and given that the whole purpose of the experiment was to avoid this, it seemed entirely counter productive. So in summary, I agree it is not the best way to create deadwood in a plantation (we have a well established ringbarking programme to do that,) in this case it seemed like the lesser of two evils to simply leave the felled timber where it was.

In relation to your second point relating to rutting by harvesting machines, there are several points to make, so please bear with me while I work through this.

1. Adam Watson's demonstration and explanation of soil podzols in the boreal forest is quite correct, and we have no argument with this. However, we do take issue with the fact that harvesting in these plantation woodlands does irreparable damage. The key reason for this is that the damage has already been done. The Linn of Dee and Car park plantations, along with many other older plantations on the estate were "deep ploughed" prior to planting. Therefore the soil podzol has already been destroyed. The soil structure is in no way natural and therefore while I agree entirely

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that rutting is unsightly, and should be avoided wherever possible, in fact it is doing no more damage to the soil than has already been done. The situation would of course be entirely different if we were to put machines into areas of "natural" woodland, but as we have no intention of doing this, then the point is irrelevant.

2. The machines we now use for timber harvesting are not the "monster machines" reported by Adam and others back in 2013. We have sourced a contractor from further down Deeside who uses *relatively* light weight machinery. Now please don't get me wrong, they are still big machines, but the forwarder for example is a 12 tonne machine rather than the 30 tonne machines more commonly used in commercial forestry. The damage they cause is therefore significantly less.
3. The photographs you have sent of the rutting all show main access routes to the central timber stacking points. I accept that there has been some rutting in and out of these points. However when you look at the total area thinned, the impact on the ground is minimal. It is really only the main access route that is rutted. I would love to say that we could avoid this entirely, but if we are to extract the timber then some rutting in and out of the main log stacks is inevitable. We do however do everything that we can to minimise this, and while you are quite right to say that the soil podzol will never recover, the ruts themselves will heal, and *will* provide niches for future regeneration.
4. I do agree with your assessment that greater use of brash matting could be made on some of these access routes and we will certainly discuss this with our contractor before we undertake harvesting in 2017 and beyond.

A more general note on our thinning programme and our biomass plant. We have always been quite clear that our thinning programme should *never* be driven by the need for timber to fuel the biomass. Our woodland plan set out a 20 year thinning programme to help us restructure the plantation woodlands, and this plan was completed before the biomass was conceived. We are simply using the by-product of conservation management activity to fuel the buildings. For interest, we have bought substantial quantities of timber from one of neighbours over the past 2 years, as they were carrying out thinning works anyway.

Whether or not it is right to thin plantation woodlands is purely a matter of opinion. There are some ecologists who believe we should simply have clear felled all the plantations in order to let nature take over. You seem to be suggesting we should leave them alone and let natural processes thin them. Both arguments are valid. The third approach is to intervene to accelerate the natural process. While intervention is something we would generally try and avoid, you have to remember that there is nothing natural about a plantation. We will never manage to turn a plantation woodland into a natural woodland. However we can take steps to improve the woodland habitat and improve the landscape impact of plantations. This is the route we have chosen to follow. Some will agree with this approach, others will disagree, and please believe me, I've heard all the arguments from equally respected ecologists and foresters!

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You make a point about leaving timber stacks in the woodland, rather than moving them to a more suitable location closer to the biomass plant. In short, I agree with you on this point and indeed our estate team had already identified this as something we would want to do from now on, if only for operational reasons. We plan to do this in the spring once the ground has dried out a bit and less damage will result.

You make a final point in relation to deer in the Linn of Dee woods. As I'm sure you are aware, I could write another letter of equal length to this one discussing this issue alone. Following the Independent Review in 2011, the management objectives for the estate were formalised in a new management plan. The Linn of Dee and Car Park woods were left open to deer, and this was a conscious decision. If you are to have any deer at all, then there must be shelter for those deer and it was a conscious decision to leave these woods open. Some people will applaud this decision, while others will disagree with it. What I would say is that we carried out a mapping exercise of our regeneration in 2016, following a baseline study in 2011. The total area of naturally regenerating woodland on Mar Lodge Estate has increased from 148 hectares in 2011 to some 835 hectares in 2016. So, we are clearly making progress, while accepting that there will be areas with little or no regeneration while deer are still present. This is a choice we made, and while not to everyone's liking, is the path we are currently on. That is not to say that change cannot happen, and we will be re-writing our management plan in 2017, so watch this space!

I hope this provides some insight into our operations, but if you would like to hear more, I would be delighted to come and talk to your members directly. Please just let me know if you would like to arrange this.

Yours sincerely

David Frew  
Operations Manager  
Mar Lodge Estate

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